

A SECRET SURVEY.

BY REAR-ADMIRAL BOYLE SOMERVILLE, C.M.G.

II.

BUSHIRE is a town situated at about eighty miles southward from the head of the Gulf, whose original *raison d'être* was, no doubt, its harbour. This reason still exists, but not for modern vessels, as it is far too shallow for anything except dhows. Regarded with the tourist's eye, it has all the appearance of a large and excellent bay of tranquil water; but when the navigator produces a chart, it is seen from the soundings that a steamer of ordinary draught would have to anchor between three and four miles from the town, and quite outside the protecting shores of the bay itself. The place was a fishing village for 1200 happy unregarded years, until 1750, when it was chosen by the Shah to be the Portsmouth of Persia. This pre-eminence persists; and when we arrived there in the *Sphinx* we found the entire Persian Navy anchored in its principal home port. This was H.I.P.M.S. *Persepolis*, a gunboat of the most extreme antiquity. We gazed on her with the respect due to age and infirmity, and then exchanged with her commanding officer the proper pompous naval visits, in the best modern style, "the usual compliments" being paid on either side, in superfine Dartmouth French and its Teheran equivalent.

The land around the harbour is, for twenty miles, a low flat plain. At its confines, the great rampart of mountains suddenly springs up, on whose top is the real Persia, 3000 feet and more above the sea, stretching all the way to the Caspian. The hot little town of Bushire, tightly squeezed within its white wall at the tip of a point of land which projects into the bay, is surrounded on three sides by the water. All the foreign consulates, and even the house of the Persian Governor, are left panting outside the wall, on the scorching plain. In 1856 we had a little war with Persia, during which Bushire surrendered to our forces, and remained in our occupation for some months. Since then, we have retained not only a consulate at the town, but also a Political Resident, whose Residency is at Rishire, six miles away.

The drive there, to report our proceedings to date, was an interesting experience. It was undertaken in a vehicle whose only living counterpart, probably, is to be found in Napoleon's carriage at Madame Tussaud's Exhibition. The ropes with which, like St Paul's ship, it was bound together, front to rear, fortunately held during the drive. As we hopped over the Alpine corrugations of the hard-baked

track, Kemp and I had grave fears of being left behind on it, in the stuffy after-part of the chariot, when, as seemed inevitable, the narrow curving isthmus which connected us with the front wheels, coachman's box, and horses, should at length yield to *force majeure*. We drove thus, in deep trepidation, past the British Consulate, the Turkish, and the Russian; then past the French and Dutch Consulates, amicably conjoined; past the Imamzada Mosque, conspicuous on its little hill, and came at last, with the two parts of our coach still wonderfully undivided, to the British Residency. The country on each side of the road was already, by the end of May, a brown desert. The crops, green six weeks earlier, were all harvested, and nothing was now alive but a few late trees, blossoming in feverish haste before the rapidly advancing summer should overtake and shrivel them; casting the flowers and leaves of to-day, to-morrow into its oven.

The Residency is an immense building, all pillars and roof, like a vast hay-barn. The rooms in it are merely spaces screened off amidst the pillars and made mosquito-proof. Its coolness and amplitude were absolute heaven, by contrast with the cramped, sweat-box cabins of a ship,—even of a ship expressly designed for hot weather, such as the *Sphinx*.

It takes a sailor really to appreciate the "blessings of the land," for the enjoyment of which he prays daily; and seldom have I been so truly

grateful for anything as for the night spent under that great roof—as wide as it was hospitable.

A couple of days later we left, to resume my running survey of the Persian coast. For thirty miles to the southward of Bushire is a wide and featureless plain, whose every indentation and kher was well known, and quite unnecessary to re-survey. From that point onward, the flat land bordering the sea is but a narrow strip—a mere foot-step between the water and the great ranges of barren 5000-feet mountains, which stand behind it as a wall for 300 miles to the southward. Somewhere along this cramped seaboard there might—but very improbably—exist some unknown crack, or even some bay; and as the water was deep, the coast could be approached sufficiently closely to investigate it comfortably and with certainty.

To the British eye, accustomed to a cool grey heaven and a green and fruitful earth, the view of the naked ribs of the brown mountains, roasting under the furious furnace of the Persian sky, raised an unceasing pity for those condemned to live in this Earthly Hell. There seemed to be quite a large number of such unfortunates. Everywhere along the dismal coastline, village succeeded village, tiny, ancient, fringed with date-palms, and surmounted, usually, by towers of strength against the enemy, whether sea-pirate or robber of the

mountains. Desert lay between each place of settled abode; desert mountains, of drear and monstrous outline, lay behind them; the green desert of the sea mourned in front of them, whitening as it broke over nameless rock and shoal. The most ambitious Power could not but pause before committing its fortunes and its children to the arms of this Moloch land, to wither miserably in the brazen heat of its arid wastes.

Our first stopping-place, ninety miles southward from Bushire, was named Ras-al-Mutaf. There is here a flat point of land, with its end curving round in a long sandy shoal, between which and the shore there is a space of moderately protected water. Here we anchored, with the double intention of making such survey as should show whether this uninviting anchorage, with its neighbouring village, could ever be sophisticated into a naval and commercial port; and also to clear up several doubts that existed as to its geographical position, as to the correctness of the charted soundings, and as to other reported details concerning it. Our intentions were frustrated. The long-pending Shamál came down on us, in a burst, out of the blazing north-west. A hurricane of flame, almost, is this terrible wind. As it strikes you, you seem to be passing the door of an open furnace: you gasp with heat and astonishment. It sweeps along the shore in a deep-brown cloud of flying dust and grit.

The date-palms, the only living things that rejoice before it, bend, tossing their tough green fronds and load of ripening fruit. The sky and the land disappear in a hot murk; mankind, too, disappears into dug-outs in the ground, shaded by boughs, while it passes over. There is nothing hid from the heat thereof. Between the gusts you may still see the slow camels, sloping southward along the coast road, burdened, strung out, sterns to the wind, disdainful even of the Shamál, without haste, without rest. Surveying work becomes impossible. There is no sun or star visible by which to find latitude and longitude. No feature remains, whether of mountain summit or of coastal rock, that is not either blurred, or else quite invisible in the brown haze; and the fierce wind raises so big a sea, with white-created waves, that boat-work and sounding are out of the question. For three detestable days and nights the Shamál blew fiercely, and still we watched and waited. At last, on the fourth day, it moderated sufficiently for us to decide that the place was useless as a harbour, both from its depths and from the fact that there was no protection from the wind.

June had opened upon us when we continued the "running survey" to the southward. It is not possible to describe the method by which such a survey is made, without becoming either unintelligible or else desperately boring.

The underlying principle is a simple one—the results produced are a mere pioneering sketch; but, for all that, in practice, it is certainly the most difficult method that exists for the charting of a coast; and it needs long experience to produce good results. When one has five or six assistants, all experts, as in a regularly commissioned surveying vessel, it is, even then, work requiring the closest care and application, and is a most exhausting performance for everybody concerned. A single day of it reduces body, brains, and eyes to the merest pulp. At a distance of seventeen years, it still requires no reminder from my journal of that running survey of the Persian coast to bring back to me the aching memory of the task. Instead of six skilled assistants, I had but two—the captain of the *Sphinx* and the navigating officer—neither of whom, naturally, had ever undertaken anything of the sort before. Fortunately, both of them turned out to be most helpful, not to say devoted. Without them, in fact, the work would have been impossible, and I should have collapsed, blinded by that blinding light, cooped in that terrific heat, while, day after day, as we steamed past it, the austere khaki coast unfolded itself ahead endlessly, and disappeared astern. Behind us stormed the Shamál, now settled down into its usual "seventy days" of summer life, when it blows continuously, often blotting out, in a sudden whirl of dust,

the "prominent object" on the coast-line, on a bearing of which I was depending to fix that part of the shore, and rendering my work of no avail. It was a most exasperating survey, but it had to be done. There was no other method by which doubt might be set at rest regarding the possible existence of an uncharted bay or harbour along the coast. For oneself, seeing might be believing; but, in order to persuade a doubting Admiralty who had not seen, it was necessary to produce on paper, not merely a written report stating that there was no such harbour, but also an actual plotted survey of the coast, together with the angles and observations on which it was based, to show that the truth was in you! Little—already known—harbours and tiny notches we passed, and in some we anchored and took soundings, while Kemp went ashore to pay a polite visit to the local Sheikh, as "eye-wash" against our real activities. It was one of his duties to pay such visits from time to time; and the Sheikhs, no doubt, thought this was merely one of these occasions. All of these places proved to be entirely unsuitable, either for naval purposes or for commerce. Many of them were exposed to the blistering Shamál, which, though worst in the summer, blows at intervals through nine months of the year, while others were open to the S.E. gales of the winter, or to both winds. Apart from disabilities of this nature, there was everywhere

the lack of fresh water; and, topping everything else, there was the climate! An efficient naval base could never be maintained by any northern nation in this Gehenna.

At length we reached Kishm Island, and, with it, the end of the survey came in sight. Kishm occupies a strong strategic position, exactly facing the narrow entrance to the Persian Gulf. It is a mountaineous island, sixty miles in length, separated from the Persian coast by a long narrow channel, named "Clarence Strait" (after good King William IV.) There are three towns on it—Kishm, on the eastern extreme, which gives the island its name; Laft, on the northern side; and Basidu, on the western end. It was to the latter spot that we directed our weary steps; and, on our arrival, had the satisfaction of seeing the Union flag run up on the flag-staff of the village—for Basidu is British! It has been so since 1809, after what cannot have been other than a hot engagement. Laft was "reduced" at the same time, but it was left at that; while Basidu became the sanatorium of the Gulf for our ships' companies, and there was also maintained there a garrison of Indian troops. The hospital and barracks, long disused, are ruins; and there is now only a small village of ninety men, who, with an old Arab, our faithful Agent, represent the colony, and are established on an area, scarcely as much as one mile square, of bare and brown, but British soil.

When Kemp visited the Agent he heard from him that, not long before, the Russian Consul for the Gulf had arrived in his small sailing dhow, on a tour of the coast. On his arrival there was immediately hoisted on the flagstaff the Union flag of Britain. The Consul, a little man but a fierce, landed; and pointing to the flag, shook his fist at it, cursed it, and demanded to know why it had been hoisted, and for how many years it had been flying there. The Agent, himself an old man with a grey beard, replied that it had been flying ever since he could remember anything, but that there was a still older inhabitant who might know more. On being sent for, this ancient replied in like manner, that he could not remember any condition of affairs in Basidu other than the British supremacy and flag. The little visitor, it appears, then danced with rage (it was in January, and the temperature permitted, without great discomfort, this exhibition of the Russian ballet), and he called both of the old Arabs "liars." "Very well, then," says our Agent with high composure, "if you know better than we do, why do you ask us?" And with this firm reply a grave international crisis closed. The Consul went back to his boat, simmering but thoughtful, and resumed his inspection of the coast.

Having thus "made our number" at Basidu, we left, and first steamed along the south side of Kishm Island, visiting, as we did so, the small

outlying islet of Henjam at its south-eastern end. Then, after passing the crumbling ruins of the old Portuguese fort at Kishm town, on the east of the island, we rounded into Clarence Strait and anchored off Laft. In 1622 we sent five ships—or the Honourable East India Company sent them—to assist the Persian forces in besieging the Portuguese at Kishm. The Persians, it seems, wanted their island back, and we wanted the Portuguese trade. Hence the alliance. Both of us got what we wanted, though in doing so we suffered an unexpected loss. William Baffin, the famous Elizabethan Arctic navigator of Baffin's Bay, was killed at the beginning of the siege of Kishm by a shot from the Portuguese castle. He certainly went in for extremes of climate during his wanderings, and would have been better advised to have stuck to the icefields and the snow!

Laft, the delightful seaside resort off which we now found ourselves, is a harbour completely enclosed, easily accessible, fairly deep for anchorage, strategically well-positioned, and defensible without difficulty — yet, with all these virtues, it is, like Naaman the Syrian, "a leper." Not only is the fresh-water supply of the most exiguous character, but the position has the reputation — a true one, for we tested it — of being the hottest place in the whole Persian Gulf, and that is to say, in the whole world. Not a breath of outside air, not even the Shamál, gets into it. We sat

and dripped helplessly all day, completing a vicious circulation of moisture by pouring down inside us bottle after bottle of partly-cooled aerated waters, which panting Goanese stewards made haste to supply. One could do nothing else but drink, and without liquid one would have become as a desiccated fruit, dried-up, mummified. I have thus consumed, in a single day at Laft, as many as twelve large bottles of the most uninspiring "pep"; and this was well below the average official thirstiness of the Sphinx. When night-time came I reposed on a grass-mat laid on my chart-table on deck, clad in the absolute minimum of clothing—in bathing-drawers, to be exact—for pyjamas about one were as abhorrent as a mattress beneath, while the temperature slowly rose, after nine o'clock, until it was well up in the hundreds by 2 A.M. The heat then steadied, and between 3 and 4 A.M. there was a blessed, blessed time when it really fell a few degrees. Then came untortured rest. But with the first crack of dawn, buzzing flies attended the death-bed of sleep, and galvanised their limp victim into sufficient activity to arise, don such raiment as might satisfy the conventions, and start off in a boat, armed with sextant and theodolite, for surveying work "in the field." The temperature then might be as low as 97°; but by 8 A.M. it would be well up in the hundreds once more, and, in order to avoid a heat-stroke, it was necessary to return on board the ship, to the shelter of

treble awnings. Nothing could be done outside that protection until about six o'clock in the evening, when an hour might be snatched before darkness closed the scene. Last could not therefore be considered as a possibility for a "naval base," in spite of its other decided advantages.

It was late in June when we steamed back through Clarence Strait, and anchored at its eastern entrance off the town of Bandar Abbás, which stands on the mainland here, and is faced by that famous island, Hormuz. Basra at the head of the Gulf, and Hormuz at its mouth, are names to take you back, as on a Magic Carpet, accompanied by Sindbad the Sailor, to a saudal-scented and romantic past. Until the seventeenth century Hormuz was the Mart of the East, where all the riches of India met in exchange with the pearls of Bahrein, with the attars, the pungent gums, and spicery of Araby the Blest; with dyed garments from Basra, with silks and carved work, damascened weapons, and delicate filigree of silver and gold from Baghdad the Fortunate. Ichabed! The glory has departed, indeed! Not a vestige now remains of it all, save dry ruins, houses crumbled so small that the few poor fishermen who still cling to the place cannot utilise them as dwellings, but make for themselves rude wigwams of date-palm leaves. On a low point above the village is the battered but still threatening remnant of a fort built by Albuquerque,

when, in September 1507, the Portuguese seized the place and its riches, and reduced its inhabitants to subjection, with no circumstance omitted of audacity and cruelty. There the Portuguese remained, in complete lordship, until 1622, when, after a siege of three months, Hormuz fell, with Kishm, before John Company's ships, aided by a Persian force. Beside the ruined fort there are many ancient tanks, now empty and dry, cut into the rocky heart of the island. In the days of its splendid youth, water for these reservoirs was brought off in skins by boat from the river Minab, ten miles away. There is no other moisture obtainable, save for a saline trickle from the hills after rain. The general appearance of the little island is very remarkable. It consists of a rounded lump of hills, with three or four central conical peaks, seven hundred feet high. The lower parts, all completely barren, are striped, and patched, and barred with a geological "dazzle-painting" in ochre and red, brown, purple, and buff, while the surmounting cones, in strong contrast, are pure white. The whole effect is that of some monstrous pudding, standing on the blue-and-white plate of the sea, over whose apex has been poured (in pre-war days!) a large jug of thick cream.

A telegram was waiting us at Bandar Abbás, which ordered us to Maskat, to await the next mail steamer, which was bringing written orders for further survey

work required, before I should leave for England. We sailed at once, rounding Cape Masadam, the Arabian gate-post of the Gulf, where it is only twenty-five miles across to the Persian shore. The extremity of the point is a tattered peninsula of hills whose heart is penetrated by deep volcanic fiords, the whole being joined by a narrow neck to the mainland to the southward. On its barren slopes there clings a settlement, said to be formed of the last remnants of the aboriginal inhabitants of Arabia, children of Shem, undiluted by the restless Bedouin blood of Ishmael, the race now deminating the remainder of that highly undesirable land.

It was refreshingly cool at Maskat, outside the Gulf limits, for the Monsoon had "broken." The gracious moisture and coolness which the Monsoon brings across the sea to India does not actually reach these deserts; but it affects the whole Indian ocean generally, so that every coastline bathed by its waters rejoices therein. The five days that followed at Maskat, while we waited for the mail, were pleasant enough. There was a good deal of back survey-work to be plotted and reports to be written, and the busy days on board the ship were usually ended by cheerful sun-downers at the Residency, with tennis and tea. The Residency was a house, however, to be apprehended with some circumspection, in spite of the hospitality of its inhabitants. It is built around the

four sides of a central court-yard. You come into it through an archway at the back, and find a broad flight of stairs on the right hand, leading to the cool verandah and living-rooms on the first floor, which thus are well raised above the heat of the ground, and look widely forth on the harbour. Mrs Resident was a lady whose kindness of heart extended itself far past the plane of humanity, and reached down, even, to our distant and nasty little relatives, the Apes. She kept, in the courtyard of the Residency, a collection of the more highly-coloured of these creatures. No Thames barge, brilliant in red, blue, and yellow, can display more startlingly effective bows, or a more originally conceived stern decoration than could these Simian guardians of the stairs; and no bargee ever had such a command of the language of execration as they. They gnashed their teeth, yearningly, at the unfortunate visitor; they leapt and danced at the full extent of their straining waist-chains, clucking and gibbering at him, or hideously shrieking battle, murder, and sudden death; they seized the hand-rail—mercifully a stout one, and they could only just reach it—and shook it in impotent fury. In brief, they put the wind up you. By closely hugging the wall on the starboard hand, and not hauling to the wind again, until well past these dangers, it was, however, just possible to circumnavigate them; and the delightful wel-

come that greeted the visitor on the top landing made quite well worth the Passage Perilous below. One day there was to be a picnic, which (it was so arranged) was to take place on the top of the steep rocky crags that rose immediately behind the Residency, to a height of about three hundred feet. There was no path, it was real mountaineering, and involved stepping upwards, nearly perpendicularly, from one dangerous and precarious foothold to the next. It was supposed to be cooler up there than on the shady verandah, and in any case it was a change. Such picnics had often taken place before, and special wooden trays, upon which to carry up the tea things, formed part of the Residential equipment. No diminution was permitted in the glory of the repast. It was set forth on the topmost crag as exquisitely as on the verandah; the silver, the linen, the delicate china—all had to be carried up by the "house-boys." No difference whatever was allowed, and they must have been jugglers of no mean attainments to have scaled these precipices, as they constantly did, carrying the heavy trays, without either smashing or spilling anything. When we, from the *Sphinx*, arrived that afternoon and had successfully evaded the raging monkeys, we were in time to witness an impressive scene and to learn a lesson in household management.

It appeared that Selim, head house-bey, had struck! He had refused point-blank again

to carry the tea things up that atrocious precipice. In my cowardly and sympathising heart I could not blame him. Not so Mrs Resident. With high originality of method, and entire knowledge of human—and especially of Arab—nature, she summoned to the verandah her whole household,—there seemed to be about twenty of them. Selim was then ceremoniously conducted to the largest and grandest chair, while the remainder of the "boys" were directed to pass before him, there enthroned, and to salaam, deep and lowly, proffering respectful salutations to one who had grown so great as even to equal the Mem Sahib in the giving of orders—the very Mem herself, upon whom the eyes of all, hitherto, had waited! It was great fun; and no strike was ever more effectively or good-humouredly broken. By the time the fourth reverential mocker had passed, Selim had had enough of it. He leapt from the chair, seized his tray of silver, and presently, with several others, his chamois-assistants, was scaling the difficult peaks, where presently we followed them, deeply impressed.

The mail steamer came at last, and the orders she brought were for us to visit, and report on, Chahbar, a good-sized bay, 150 miles away on the Makran coast, opposite Maskat—whether Persian or Beluchi, it would be difficult to say. It was of strategic importance, and that was enough for us. We sailed immediately for that delectable spot, and spent

there five days in obtaining replies to the strenuous string of questions to which it was my task to find the answers. The old *Sphinx* rolled ceaselessly and abominably day and night on the Monsoon swell which swept in and round the bay; but apart from that, and apart from its almost entire barrenness and lack of water, the place certainly had possibilities. In the pursuit of angles and heights, I climbed the hills that lie beyond the plain on which the little town stands; and I have often wondered since if any True Believer came across and cursed my heel-marks in the sand. India-rubber heels were comparatively new in those days, and mine were screwed on with a metal arrangement which left a clearly marked impression of a Geneva cross behind it, easily to be construed by an imaginative native into a sign of the times! We left Chah-bar, our work completed, profoundly sympathising with the staff of the Indian Telegraph Station there marooned in the desert, in tantalising touch with the news and the affairs of the great world, and, like lighthouse-keepers on some isolated rock, in sight of its passing ships, but condemned to stand outside it, a lonely link in the chain of Eastern Empire.

Three days later I was packed up, and steaming away into the night, by the 10.30 P.M. train from Karachi to Bombay. The line goes across a great stretch of desert, and

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plunged us at once into heat and drought nearly up to Persian Gulf standards. As I lay in my carriage gasping for air, parched with thirst, the train drew up at the platform of some unimaginable place of habitation in the wilderness, and there came in at my closely-shuttered window—for I had a whole carriage to myself—a voice which said: “Would you like some iced grapes?” I imagined at first, in some dismay, that this was only “light-headedness,” and the premonition of a heat-stroke; but it turned out to be a real offer, which almost immediately materialised. If Mr Bell, of the Indian Police, and his sister have forgotten that kind act, and how they shared the contents of their ice-box (without which no sane Indian travels by train in the height of the summer) with an unknown griffin wayfarer, who had no such equipment, they may now know that it has ever been remembered by a ceaselessly grateful recipient!

I sailed from Bombay in the good ship *Arabia*, and got home at the end of July, cool once more, and happy, bringing my sheaves with me—sheaves, in this case, of reports and charts, which included, I may humbly believe, discoveries of a useful character. The Admiralty letter of thanks, which in due course they evoked, made a stimulating glow in that dark corner where each one keeps, or should keep, a critical estimation of his own deeds.

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